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Volunteers

# When the Ax Falls: Budget Cutting and Volunteers

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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*Can an organization turn to volunteers to fill gaps when budgets are cut and employees laid off?*

This ancient question has been resurfacing quite a bit recently, for obvious economic reasons. For many paid staff, it is fearfully voiced as, “Will my organization do this?” Even in the best of times, employees are often wary of new volunteer projects because of questions of job security, so it’s hard to deny the threat when budgets are in real danger.

The Minnesota Association for Volunteer Administration (MAVA) has just released a study of 280 volunteer program leaders in their state, *The Status of Minnesota’s Volunteer Programs in a Shifting Environment*. 86% of respondents reported organizational fiscal stress and close to 60% reported an increased reliance on volunteers compared to a year ago (<http://www.mavanetwork.org/shiftingenv>).

I suspect that most readers here, being immersed in the dogma of our volunteer management profession, have a visceral negative reaction to even a hint of the “replacement” question. My stomach tightens, too. But we have to let our brains keep working and find a way to respond with care and concern when our organizations are struggling for their lives. Economic crisis is a teachable moment and has the potential to educate everyone about smart, motivating engagement of volunteers.

I see three levels of action: prevention/preparation; responding to hard times; and emergency mode.

## Prevention/Preparation

Here is what I always give as my best advice: Plan for volunteers when times are good if you want their help in times of crisis. Crisis is the worst time for an organization to begin to involve volunteers. This reinforces the notion that volunteers are a temporary band-aid and is sure to be met with staff resistance to volunteer help just when they themselves are coping with an increased workload.

Further, it is hard to sound sincere to the public about welcoming their help when recruiting in desperation.

If an organization already has an established volunteer corps and a solid volunteer management process, it is legitimate to assess how this group of loyal supporters can best be deployed to respond to an economic emergency. Top management ought to know already that volunteers are cost-effective but are never a “free” resource.

Unfortunately, it is not unusual to see organizations lay off their director of volunteer involvement in the first round of staff cuts. The theory is that there are already volunteers in place and there will be few immediate consequences from this vacancy. Then, often without seeing the irony, the same organizations also announce that they are seeking more volunteers!

Clearly it is my position that the more critical volunteers are to an organization, the more important the position of the person who leads the volunteer program. Not only will such a manager work to expand the volunteer corps, but current volunteers can feel unsupported and taken for granted if they lose their staff liaison.

## Responding to Hard Times

In general, it is next to impossible to fill a gap left by a full-time employee with a single, qualified and available volunteer. Instead it would require an intricate schedule of several volunteers, each giving a certain number of hours per week and each bringing the organization a different set of qualifications. Take all the concerns of “job sharing” and multiply them several fold!

The best way to handle the real problem of forced lay-offs is to reassess the job descriptions of the *entire staff*, both those who have left and those remaining. This means doing a task analysis of the way things really work in the organization, not just what was put on paper in the distant past. Scrutinize the various tasks that each employee is/was doing and identify the following sorts of things:

- What is someone doing once a week or periodically, rather than daily or on an inflexible schedule?
- What is someone doing that really does not require his or her specialized training? (For example, a caseworker may spend a lot of time away from clients finding referral information – telephone calls, Internet searches – or a librarian might be diverted from core work by changing the book displays and bulletin boards.)
- What is someone doing that might be done more effectively by someone else with more specialized training in that skill?

Once you have identified such tasks, you are ready to rewrite all the staff job descriptions. First be sure these contain all the tasks that require daily attention, special training, etc., *adding* the similar critical responsibilities that had been assigned to the laid-off staff members. Next, *remove* the periodic or less technical responsibilities. You end up with the remaining employees now tasked

primarily with the most vital, daily functions. The remaining activities then become the basis for legitimate volunteer position descriptions. You will be asking volunteers to handle important work that can be done on a once-a-week basis or that makes use of special talents for which the volunteers have been recruited.

Now turn to the current assignments that volunteers are filling and ask this major question: *Are these the most essential things we need right now?* Weigh the list of tasks you've just culled from the employees against what volunteers are doing and make choices. Of course include volunteers in this deliberation. You can assume that they want to be of the greatest help and will be proud to be seen as part of keeping the organization afloat.

This approach to the unfortunate need to trim the budget is therefore good management of both paid and volunteer staff. The organization is paying for the best utilization of its employees and will attract volunteers in its support. It is also more likely to avoid the mistake of recruiting volunteers mainly for clerical roles at a time when increasing numbers of people are seeking more challenging ways to serve the causes in which they believe. Not to mention giving unemployed people a way to keep their professional skills alive while doing something worthwhile for others. (Another finding in the MAVA study was that 52% of the respondents said they were interviewing new volunteers with stronger work skills and 54% said these applicants were more likely to be unemployed.)

## Emergency Mode

For some organizations, the financial choices have come down to eliminating services (even closing the doors altogether) or turning to volunteer help as a stopgap measure. In that sort of crisis, your *mission* comes first. Volunteers as well as paid staff understand and respect that. It is legitimate to share information about the emergency situation with current and potential volunteers and to ask for their help. You are likely to get it.

Again, the first task is to reassess the job descriptions of the employees, being even more deliberate in making sure primary, daily services are assigned to paid staff. Then look at what, where, and how volunteers are doing now. Are they familiar enough with the work of a unit or area that they might take on additional responsibilities? Would they be willing to increase their volunteer time for, say, two months? Can they help you to recruit more emergency volunteers (with the skills you need most) and train them on-the-job? This is also a legitimate question to pose to board members, especially those with corporate ties.

Of course this is not a great situation! The key is honest and open communication about the plans to hold things together until new funding can be found. Solicit everyone's ideas for how to operate in the crisis. Set a timeline for reassessing how things are going and, perhaps, for when to throw in the towel. Volunteers are a vital part of transitioning to a more effective, fully-funded organization but they cannot be expected to carry the load indefinitely.

Most important, always remember that volunteers are your most effective advocates for funding your work. Especially in a crisis, make sure you are asking volunteers to be spokespeople with legislators, donors, and other funders. Raising more money *and* having great volunteers are mutually compatible goals.

And, to repeat: The best way to gain expanded volunteer support in lean times is to have incorporated volunteers as a welcome resource in the first place.

- Are you facing pressure to recruit more volunteers because funding has been cut? How are you responding?
- How are you realigning volunteer position descriptions to be sure they are meeting the most pressing needs today?
- What else are you experiencing about “paid vs. volunteer” thinking in your organization?

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***Submitted 9 December 2009 by Reed Dewey, Director, Montgomery County Volunteer Center, Rockville, MD USA***

If the government and nonprofit sectors can better engage volunteers in positions of leadership and management roles, they will be able to leverage the work much more. If we're to engage volunteers more in this way, we'll need to treat them more as one of the team rather than "the volunteers." Volunteer Managers can show their worth even more if they leverage volunteers and engage other staff in this endeavor.

***Submitted 1 December 2009 by H. Roberts, President, Blankie Depot/Project Linus New Jersey, Keyport/NJ USA***

Agency to agency resource sharing is a viable option. In my immediate area there are over 300 non profits. In our own organization we have recruited and trained more than 7,000 volunteers since 1999. When sister charities approach us about manpower issues I share these opportunities with our large volunteer network through our e-newsletter. Many of the volunteers reporting to us are looking for additional opportunities. It is one of our goals, in support of the non profit community, to educate the time giving public where need is greatest. Therefore, we not only recruit for our own mission, we encourage volunteers we train to consider other community service positions. Sharing resources is mutually beneficial to all of us and keeps sharp, talented people active in service. I highly recommend that charity's broaden their approach to agency partnering during this professional crisis.

Happy Holidays!

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